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NEWFOUNDLAND, VIKINGS
AND THE NATIVE AMERICANS

INUIT THROAT SINGING



Newfoundland Healing

Travelling to the Mi'kmaq People
By Annie Spencer



This month a wooden sailing ship is sailing round the coast of Newfoundland. The ship, the *Islandingjur*, modelled on a Viking ship excavated in Norway, has sailed from Iceland to Newfoundland to commemorate the 1,000 year anniversary of the arrival of the Vikings.

An exhibition currently showing in St John's, the capital of Newfoundland, records the history of the first contact between the Vikings and the aboriginals they found there. These adventurers had already established a colony on Greenland before sailing west. With Lief Ericson at the helm, they landed and later established a base at a place now called L'Anse aux Meadows, on the north coast of Newfoundland. From there they explored the interior of the island, and also voyaged further into the hinterland of North America along the St Lawrence Seaway. They found items that they couldn't get in Greenland, mainly wood for building homes and ships and vines that produced alcoholic drink for their partying. Already living around this area were the ancestors of the Innu, the Beothuk and the Miikmaq. Encounters between the two groups were both peaceful and warlike. In the end, it seems that there were not enough members of their band to establish bases in Both Newfoundland and Greenland, so within

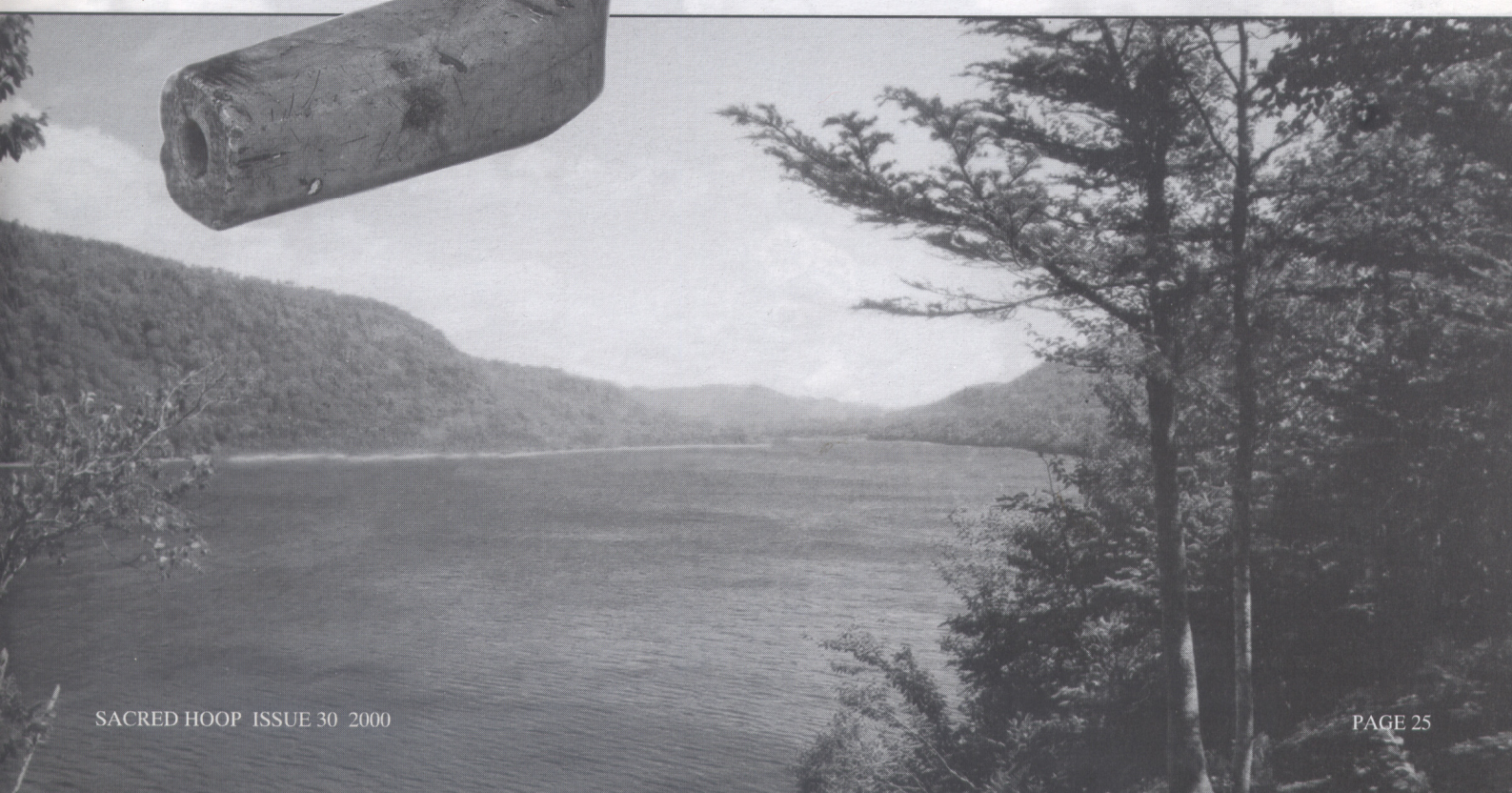
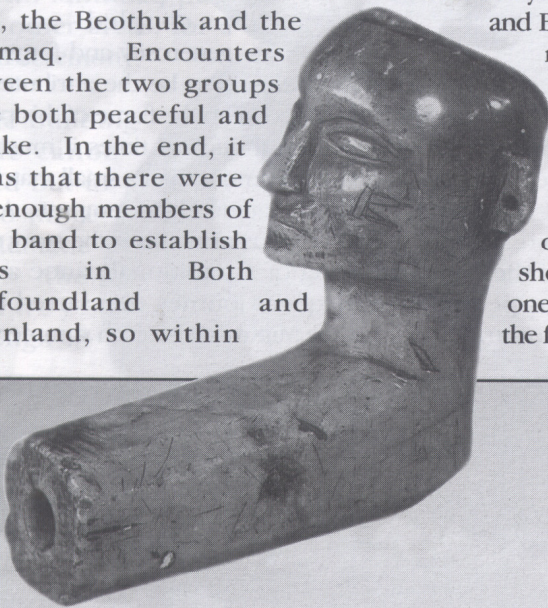
two decades the Vikings had abandoned the former. The native peoples were then left in peace for a few hundred years until the arrival of John Cabot in 1496.

The introduction to the exhibition explains the meeting of the Vikings and locals in this way: they claim that we are all descended from shared ancestors in Africa and that when these ancient peoples started travelling "some turned right and others turned left. Eventually the two groups met up in Newfoundland. The commentary goes on to describe how by now, each group had picked up different customs, languages etc and that they even looked different, in fact they had forgotten one another. Hence their inability to welcome one another as the long lost kin that they were.

It is a nice, clean way of describing the centuries of war, deprivation and oppression that have been visited on our cousins by the Europeans who made it across to the Americas. Although the Vikings didn't stay for long, a few hundred years later, the picture changed and Europeans arrived to stay. By now we are all aware that the people that they found there have been ill-treated on a massive scale ever since. However much one reads in books and watches on television, one is always shocked again, I think, when one comes across a situation in the flesh.

About four hundred miles away from St John's, the capital of Newfoundland where the exhibition is being held, I attended an international conference on understanding healing through diversity of practice. The conference drew together healers, doctors, social workers, nurses, ceremonialists, psychologists from as diverse places as the west coast of Canada, the east coast of the United States, England and Israel. There was a fascinating sharing of diverse practices, ideologies and systems of healing, caring for the sick and dealing with death and dying. Experiences were shared around the meeting of allopathic and traditional medical practices. We explored how traditional practices help to rebuild and hold together the fabric of communities. There was a strong experiential strand to the conference. In one room we might be learning about the extraction of entities, in another, we might hear a traditional story told by a pipe smoking woman hidden within a huge wooden frog mask. Meanwhile, others were learning about leadership and issues of co-operation as they learned how to share out tasks and delegate responsibility while building and then using a sweatlodge.

Through all this stimulating and creative activity ran a darker thread that found its way into nearly every workshop and presentation. This



was the extreme abuse and oppression that the aboriginal peoples have suffered at the hands of the colonialists for the past 500 years. The story starts with the first colonists who brought over diseases that decimated whole communities. It continues with the European arrogance that thought we had the right to clear the land of others to make way for ourselves. Entrenched, through centuries of feudalism in our own countries, in the belief that some people are born to rule and others are quite simply expendable, we cleared forests to make way for ourselves. The Mi'Kmaq told how at some periods the Europeans would shoot them for sport rather than as some ride to the hounds today. And through it all, we made no attempt to understand their spiritual beliefs but by coercion forced the, in this case, Roman Catholic religion onto them. Survivors from schools where they were forcibly sent to be acculturated into European ways told tales of beatings and abuse of all kinds. At almost every presentation we heard stories of alcoholism, abuse and family abuse. Merely to hear these accounts was almost overwhelming. I admired the tenacity with which these people clung to their struggle to survive and regain their right to live according to their own belief systems in the midst of such horror.

Stories that were told included one from a man whose sexual abuse

started at five and then was continued in a different form at eleven. Not surprisingly, this was followed by a period of severe alcoholism in early adult life. I heard of women describing how they would frequently drive their children around the countryside while blind drunk. Of how glad they were for a second chance as grandmothers: "my grandchildren will never feel fear when a drunk walks into the house. They need never hide under the beds as my children hid". I heard of a boarding school in St John's where the first accusations of sexual abuse, presented in the seventies, took nearly twenty years to come to light because of corruption and cronyism.

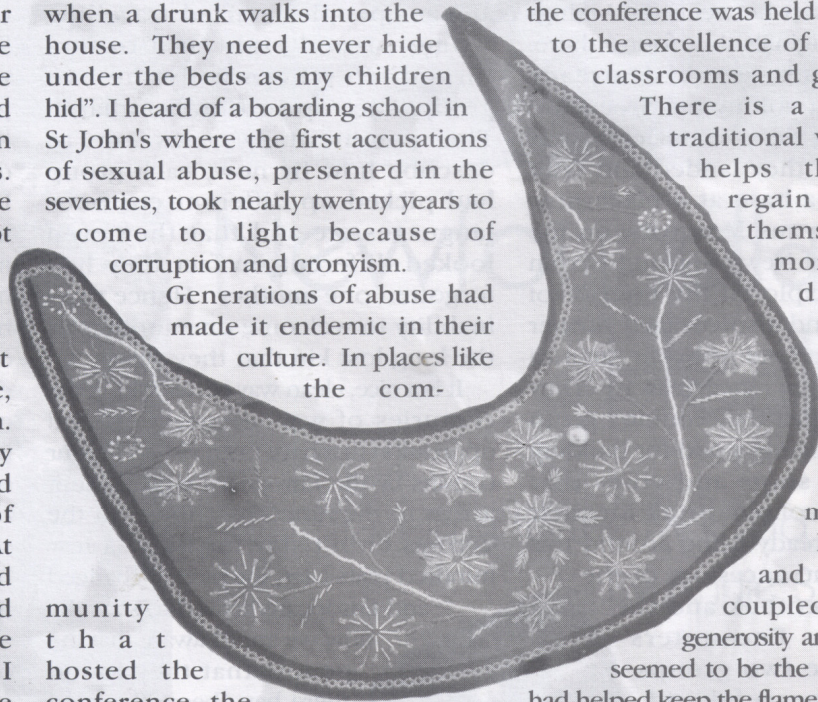
Generations of abuse had made it endemic in their culture. In places like the com-

munity that hosted the conference, the Conne River Reserve, traditional ways and teachings had all but been wiped out. In the 1920's a particularly determined Catholic priest had managed to get the chief of the band or local group of Mi'Kmaq people, himself exiled to the mainland to

ensure final and complete subjugation of the people to the Catholic religion and European ways. And yet he failed. By the time I arrived in the year 2000, less than 80 years later, I found a very different story. In place of tar paper shacks were pretty, well painted wooden houses, each set back from the road. Prosperous businesses flourished; there was a good local school where the conference was held - I can attest to the excellence of its showers, classrooms and gymnasium.

There is a revival of traditional ways, which helps the people regain a pride in themselves once more. The drumming and singing of the young men was as impressive and deeply moving.

Perseverance and tenacity coupled with generosity and forgiveness seemed to be the attributes that had helped keep the flame of this people alive even though at times it must have seemed no more than a small matchstick flicker threatened by a tempest. A story that well illustrates this is the story of the making of a traditional canoe and its subsequent journey to a sacred island that the Mi'Kmaq visit each summer.



The current chief on the Conne River Reserve is Missel Joe a man who manages to combine the determination of a bull with a relaxed, friendly attitude. Missel Joe tells how he discovered a traditional canoe in a museum back in the 1980's. His interest was particularly keen because his grandfather had been a canoe maker of some standing. His first response was to approach the museum with a request for the canoe to be returned to his people. When this failed, he decided to reconstruct one. This turned out to be a long laborious job. He had to track down people who still carried the skills necessary, the wood and other materials had to be found and he had collect a group together who would involve themselves in this project and were prepared to journey with him once the canoe was made. The journey he proposed was not as long as the Viking one referred to above. But was nevertheless highly significant for his people. Each year for centuries at least, they had made a journey to an island off the coast where they met up with Mi'kmaq peoples from other areas, for a sacred ceremony.

The building of the canoe turned out to be no more problematic than the journey. Although in

all it took only a few weeks, it took three years before they finally reached their destination in 1999. All obstacles imaginable arose to frustrate their efforts. These ranged from storms at sea that either kept them waiting on the shore or once forced them to abandon the canoe. Part of the journey took them overland and during this short journey, disaster struck and the nose of the canoe was damaged. They finally arrived at their destination many years and two canoes later.

I see this as a fitting metaphor for their life over the last centuries. In spite of huge obstacles, and endless setbacks, they have kept going with determination and an endless supply of jokes. At last, the community has won the right to live according to their own customs. They are regaining traditional spiritual and healing practices and gaining prosperity in the modern world. A pow wow was held immediately after the conference. Rather like a traditional summer fair, this is a gathering of the people, with stalls and food and

campers and
gossip
and

even the occasional karaoke. Central to the proceedings are traditional drumming, dancing and singing. Some of this is ceremonial and in some the dancers compete. More than one person came up to me and told me how wonderful it is that this can now be done in the open once more. It was hard for me to understand how moving it was for these people. Perhaps indeed we have come full circle from the arrival of the first Europeans to a time when the First People of the Americas can begin to take a respected place in the culture and be honoured for the considerable gifts that they bring to it.

Annie Spencer has worked for many years with Native teachers, and integrates the Medicine teachings she has learnt from them with her skills of humanistic psychology. She facilitates groups both here and abroad. She is co-founder of Shamanka, the Womens shamanic training organisation (see their advert in this issue). Her next training course The Ceremonial Way, starts in November 2000. Tel : (01225) 312728.

PHOTOS:
Page 24 - Top Left : Traditional Wooden Lodge in the woods *.
Inset : Passamaquoddy Birch bark Canoe. The Passamaquoddy are neighbours of the Mi'kmaq. Bottom : Traditional Mi'kmaq wooden lodge with posed couple photographed in 1873.
Page 25 - Inset Mi'kmaq carved pipe bowl. Bottom : The Conne River Newfoundland *.
Page 26 - Inset : Mi'kmaq mens beaded cape for formal occasions. Wool trade cloth and glass beads. Bottom ; The hope for the future, Mi'kmaq youth at a pow wow *.
Page 27 - Inset : Mi'kmaq dice game set. Consisting of a wooden bowl, round bone dice and wooden counting sticks. Late 19th or early 20th century. Bottom : Modern pow wow ground with the now, more common canvas lodges *.
* Photos © Annie Spencer 2000.

